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SUBJECT: BELGIUM: KING ASKS FORMER PM MARTENS TO SMOOTH PATH  
TO NEW LETERME GOVERNMENT

BRUSSELS 00001579 001.2 OF 002

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SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) After current Belgian Prime Minister Herman Van Rompuy was selected on November 19 as the first permanent President of the European Council, King Albert asked Minister of State and former PM Wilfried Martens to come back from retirement to serve as a "mediator" between the five parties that make up the current coalition government. The King hopes Martens can smooth the path for the expected return of Yves Leterme, who was PM from March through December 2008, to the PM's office from his current post of Foreign Minister. All indications are that the Flemish Christian Democrat (CD&V) Leterme will be the next Prime Minister. The King and the current government seek the coalition parties' agreement to work together through the upcoming Belgian European Union (EU) Presidency (July - December 2010). Martens will also seek an agreement between the parties on a proposal for discussing and ultimately resolving two long-simmering issues that prevented Leterme from forming a government for almost a year after his electoral success in June 2007: Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde (BHV), which has to do with the rights of the French and Dutch-speaking language communities, and devolution, which involves determining which responsibilities currently with the federal government will next be given to the regions. End Summary.

Martens the Mediator

¶2. (SBU) The King tasked former PM and Minister of State Wilfried Martens with his mediation mission following the November 19 EU Council decision to name Belgium's Flemish Christian Democrat (CD&V) Prime Minister Herman Van Rompuy EU Council President. Martens (also CD&V) was asked to help craft a political agreement on a way forward on the so-called "institutional issues," namely BHV and devolution, between the governing parties that would help pave the way to an easy transition to a new government to be led by fellow CD&V member Yves Leterme, currently Foreign Minister and PM immediately before Van Rompuy. Martens met with the party and government leaders over the weekend of November 21-22 and submitted a draft proposal to the presidents of the majority parties on November 23. He was expected to submit the proposal to the King on November 24. If everything goes according to plan, Van Rompuy will officially resign his position and Yves Leterme will be sworn in as PM later the week of November 23, according to well-placed CD&V sources.

¶3. (SBU) Martens is charged only with finding a working plan and process for dealing with BHV, not an actual solution, which is sensible, given that the BHV problem has existed since 1963. According to the press, the five coalition parties agree that this festering issue should be dealt with before Belgium assumes the EU presidency during the second half of 2010. Leterme's first government fell in July 2008 when he was finally unable to solve BHV by his self-imposed July 2008 deadline. Martens' report to the King is to contain results of his discussions between current PM Van Rompuy, FM Leterme, the five vice premiers, and the majority party presidents. Though an agreement on BHV during the firings, the Francophobe party, it QJuly until December 2007, Leterme engineered a vote of the Flemish representatives in Parliament to split BHV, which was unanimously opposed by all French MPs. In December 2007, the King asked the previous PM Guy Verhofstadt to lead an interim government until Leterme was able to negotiate his own government. Leterme finally became PM in March 2008, but offered his resignation in July 2008 when the Flemish Nationalist N-VA broke its alliance with the CD&V because of its failure to reach a solution acceptable to

BRUSSELS 00001579 002.2 OF 002

the N-VA on BHV and devolution. The King did not accept his resignation and the Leterme government carried on until

December 2008, when allegations in the press of judicial interference related to the sale of Belgium's largest bank Fortis caused the collapse of his government. Herman Van Rompuy then took over as PM, and Leterme came back as FM in a July 2008 Cabinet reshuffle. That period was the longest drawn out political crisis in Belgium's political history, which is saying something. Leterme, PM Van Rompuy, and the King, all want assurances that the majority party leaders are willing to negotiate on institutional issues in the coming months.

¶6. (SBU) While there has been some speculation in the press about some shuffling of ministerial positions, CD&V party president Marianne Thyssen has already made it clear that the party will not give up the foreign affairs portfolio, especially given Belgium's upcoming EU presidency. Vice Premier and Public Enterprise Minister Steven Vanackere, who has no known foreign policy experience, is the only candidate the CD&V has suggested for the post.

Comment

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¶7. (SBU) While the coalition parties have said nothing to show that a compromise on BHV is in the offing, neither have they made any hard-line statements that would make discussions on that long-standing problem a non-starter. The King, the mediator Martens, and the presumed-PM-to be Leterme would all like to create as stable a political environment as is possible before and during the Belgian EU presidency. Therefore, it is very important that government party leaders refrain from saying anything that would kill the prospect of a negotiated deal, which could immediately throw a new Leterme government into another crisis. Whether the coalition partners can maintain that discipline is another question altogether.

GUTMAN